

WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

Somehow, the word penitentiary has been misinterpreted and redefined. Today there are pre and post synonyms replacing the word penitentiary. For example, prison, institution, plantation, concentration camp, penal farm, correctional facility, and the big house are substituted names for the word penitentiary. The true term penitentiary derives from the word penitent. I shall ask, what happened to reform and can a person change while in prison? Penitent by definition is being sorry for having done wrong and willing to atone, repentant.

Likewise, penance derives from the word penitent. Penance is a sacrament involving the confession of sin, repentance, and submission to penalties imposed followed by absolution. The penitentiary no longer initiates reform but instead the system focuses more on punishment. Surely, the Quakers understood that for the most part punishment was the least concern and accepting responsibility and asking for forgiveness of ones sin is true repentance. From a spiritual concept forgiveness is abroad. Therefore, it depends on your belief but I believe true forgiveness starts with forgiving self. When you forgive self it makes it that much easier to forgive someone else. Show me one living soul whose without sin and without question, I shall willingly accept that human being as being the mighty creator.

Today's society fearfully hopes that criminals are locked away and never to be released back out into society. On the other hand, 90% of prisoners will be released and a high percent of those individuals released from prison will more than likely re-offend. So how do we prevent the re-offenders from re-offending? First, the system must take notice to the un-reported percentage of those that are released and are able to function back out into society. Second, support is necessary inside and outside the penitentiary

walls. Lastly, self initiated rehabilitation needs to be recognized.

As of today, I am still being held in captivity. The place is the state penitentiary/institution a dwelling place that we refer to as being the land of the living dead. The penitentiary statistics are not based on success; instead it receives recognition off the growing rate of failure. The greatest percent of those that do not re-offend are least likely to be heard of; therefore, I shall lend my voice to the voiceless. The system needs to change the vigorous way of how it reports failure over success. We need more people in society to raise their voice on the issues of equality, freedom, and justice. Restorative justice is essential to our wondering society but the system is least concerned about whether or not you succeed. Which reminds me, is not the penitentiary a place for reform and to help reshape the negative mind state of criminals by offering positive alternative ways of thinking? I would love to see the system change its practice of rewarding failure with a gold badge of honor and while cheating success with a half-dime size piece of copper.

Most common criminals re-offend because of the lack of support. The public needs to do a better job by offering support to those that are released. If a man or woman has been held in bondage for a long time, let's say for a period of decade or more it is inconceivable to those that wonder the mental trauma that he or she has sustained. Once he or she is released the fear immediately sets in because the world that they once knew has completely transformed. They are left to fend for themselves in a marked society that targets ex-cons. The norm clichés is if you do the crime then you must do the time. However, once you have done the time, why then are the individuals still being held accountable for the crime? Would this not be considered as a double standard? In the majority of cases, the ex-cons close love ones is either dead or are distance relatives.

Having served a substantial amount of time the transition back into society will be difficult. So what is this person to do upon release? With no support available, homelessness, and society rejection; there can be but only one option. It is easy to result back to the life of crime under these harsh circumstances. When you cannot get a decent job based solely on the discriminative fact of being an ex-con this can be discouraging. The system needs to encourage more business owners to hire ex-cons and set stipulation on ethics of equality. Once he or she has done their time there should be inside and outside support ready to be implemented.

The prison system offers certain programs within the walls. As a recovering drug user/dealer, I have received a certificate for completing substance abuse and the after care program. I am not ashamed to admit that I sold the poisonous drug of crack cocaine that destroyed many lives including my own. I was able to overcome the peer pressure of doing drugs on the outside. I experimented with marijuana once on the outside but three years into my incarceration I smoked my first whole joint while on death row. Also, I speak to at-risk youth with hopes of stirring them back on the right path. When thinking in terms of the consequences young teens must learn to think before they react. The primary objective is to help uneducated teens make better choices.

In 2004, I managed to get my G.E.D. The inside and outside support helped motivate me to work harder and to never say that I cannot because the word cannot is without motion. Hard work pays off and my daily job as a teacher's assistance allows me to help other inmates achieve the same goal of getting their G.E.D. When you give back, you help others move forward. I extend special thanks to acknowledge Ms. Butler and Mr. Hopkins. Ms. Butler is a teacher that has faithfully dedicated over 20 years to educating prisoners. Likewise, Mr. Hopkins is a retired professor who taught at Villanova University and now volunteers his time as a tutor. He visits the penitentiary once a week.

Mr. Hopkins tutors the penitentiary students on their math and those prisoners are one step away from getting their G.E.D. They were such an inspiration in helping me to achieve the goal of getting my G.E.D. and undoubtedly their love for education is genuine. I shall add that knowledge, education, and experience are the ingredients to power and the lack, thereof, is defined as the deadly potion of ignorance.

In 2005, I appeared in the MSNBC documentary Lock Up at River Bend Maximum Security Institution. The documentary shows both positive and negative down side to prison. Society hardly ever gets the chance to see that there are positive individuals in the penitentiary. I was interviewed in the documentary and expressed my deepest passion. I shared an article that I wrote for the prison paper entitled "LIFE AFTER DEATH." I truly believe that the spirit of a man and woman is connected to the infinite source of eternal life.

In 2006, the inmates involved with chapter one of Project: New Beginning, the organization joined forces with Film Nashville and completed a documentary on rehabilitation and creative works of art. I made a cameo appearance reciting poetry, consecutive to a personal interview that entails past, present and future insight on the struggle of human existence. There are more incarcerated prisoners in the United States of America than any other geographic location on this planet. Therefore, the remaining population on the outside will not know that you exist unless you make yourself known. We can use the analysis of the tree that fell in the forest but never made a sound. No one heard the tree fall because it did not scream for help. If you die and no one remembers your existence, were you really living? I have asked this question repeatedly, but my answer has not changed. It is possible to have lived and that the pre-existence of the body was a shadow unknown and no one paid much attention to the least of them. The human existence is kept alive only in memory or to recall.

On Tuesday evening at 7:00 p.m., I attend a class where a group of us inmates gather around the round table and discuss different issues about self-improvement. The class sponsor is a free world volunteer that comes out every week to share his success but not without sharing his trials and errors. He has been an alcoholic, a drug user, and a nobody, until he hit rock bottom. He sought help for his problems and has since been clean for over a decade. As a successful real-estate developer, he understands that to give up will be to accept failure. "Learning to Live" is the name of the class that I look forward to attending each week.

I currently serve as an inmate grievance board member. I am an unbiased representative, hearing complaints for the inmate general population. Whereas, numerous complaints are filed on the living conditions, medical treatment, and inappropriate conduct of officers who mistreat inmates under distress. A good friend of mine passed away November 18, 2006. He was 57 years old and needed a quadruple bypass surgery. The only real treatment that he received was a six-day vacation to the outside hospital. He mentioned eating a good meal while under observation at the hospital. With one arm chained to the metal railing, that circled the bed, the other hand was free to grip the tender baked chicken that left an every lasting taste in his mouth, and an unforgettable smile on his face.

The doctor sent him back to the penitentiary and requested immediate surgery. The penitentiary medical department had convinced him that the surgery had been schedule and he believed that they were telling him the truth. He staggered around for at least 6 weeks having lost over 40lbs. while normally weighing at an average of 145lbs soak and wet. He sat, short of breathe; his frail discolored body clung to life. He was provided with the penitentiary remedy of ibuprofen that is proscribed by the doctor for all illnesses or injuries. He died slumped over in the chair with the medicine still clutched in his

hands. Like a new born baby I wept and not for the sole purpose of sympathy but instead out of anger, and knowing that he would still be here had the state paid the necessary cost for the surgery. In fact, the twenty thousand some odd dollars that it cost to house an inmate every year is now being paid to house a new comer. Saving a life is not worth the cost of spending the tax payer's funds. The cost of the surgery was far greater than the 20 thousand odd dollars to keep him alive. Plus, I shall say in defense of the system that it is a no win situation because you cannot make money off a dead prisoner at least not in Billy's case. However, it is feasible to spend whatever the cost is to enslave a prisoner.

R.I.P. Billy

Fortunately, with God in mind I wanted to learn more about religion and to seek spiritual growth. For the last two years I have attended Vanderbilt Divinity School. The volunteer professors along with the Vanderbilt students come out to the prison and sits amongst us so called harden criminals. We realize that we share more in common than uncommon. Like for example, we all believe in community, spiritual growth, and restorative justice. These are some of the steps that I have taken for self-improvement. I was not forced to join a self-help program nor did the system encourage me to attend such volunteer classes that would further my growth and development.

I have been incarcerated since the age of 18. At the age of 33 years old, I am serving an unjust term of life with the possibility of parole. The unknowing public has labeled me as the stereotypical prisoner. That he shouldn't care because he has nothing to lose and that no program will do him any good. I disagree because when you want better for self, you and only you will have to take the initiative to do better. The penitentiary needs more programs readily available such as educational programs for those that desire to change. Inmates can no longer seek a full education unless one can afford to pay. At 17 cents an hour, I doubt it very serious that it would cover the cost but

for the sake of argument, this brings up another interesting issue. Does crime pay? Prisoners are paid the maximum of 50 cents an hour which is a ruff estimate of \$56.00 a month. By the time that a prisoner pays restitution and purchases the necessary necessities that are needed such as soap, shampoo, toothpaste, and etc. the inmate account is showing zero balance. The federal pell grants were cut years ago disallowing inmates to take a college course to further their education. Why educate a prisoner? Simple, so that the prisoner can educate the young generation and better serve the public. Also, it will be more proof and concrete evidence to how true reform truly works. Most importantly, we believe that ignorance is no logical reason for committing a crime. However, education will provide prisoners with a working tool that will help to build a better life than the life before prison. Surely, society does not want to see a prisoner released with knowledge that there was not any programs provided nor available to help reform the individuals. There are several needs for programs within the walls of the penitentiary. Positive reform offers hope and inspires prisoners to want more out of life. Ex-cons can work towards establishing their own businesses and independent careers. Mainly, the greatest concern for programs is that once the prisoner is released that he/she will not be the same lawless individual that violated society trust. Programs do work and how you work the program will depend on your willingness to change. The system needs to acknowledge true reform. Society needs to know that rehabilitation is self-initiated and programs are the allies that help facilitate change.

If we want to see change, we first must be willing to change the way we think. Start by supporting those who deserve a second chance. Be aware of the fact that fear is instilled in the minds of the mindless. So if you have a mind of your own, you should know that fear is powerless, and unless you embrace the true power of mind fear will

continue to rule. Some people tend to allow others to think for them, unaware of the fact that self-awareness is the key to self-control.

Changing our value system, acknowledging responsibility and building character is actively penitentiary reform. I accept the fact that the system is not going to change but it does not mean that for the betterment of humanity that I cannot change. I would rather be a public benefit, and not society's burden. When you decide to become involved and less judgmental you can make a positive difference.

Written by Fredrick Sledge
Presentation Mr. Hopkins
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